

RollPlay

GM
NOTEBOOK
ISSUE 5

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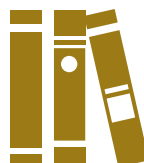
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Welcome, Patrons!

This month, and this issue, is all about Court of Swords. Our creative energy has been dedicated to making the eight hour live show a success, and I think we managed to pull off something pretty great. In this issue I'll share both my prep for the episode as well as my thoughts post-show about live D&D and how the game went. I hope you had a chance to watch the show, either live or via the RollPlay YouTube channel, and I hope you'll enjoy this peek into what goes into preparation for a live show.

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 5 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

COURT OF SWORDS LIVE SHOW PREP



Where We Are At, Right Now

Because of the inclusion of Persnidgetron Torbisher and his noble quest against the Rock Gnome King, the game has taken kind of a right-angle turn away from the previous arc. I'm pretty okay with that - it's actually functionally easier for us to make this a show where the arcs are defined by our guests rather than attempting to shoehorn the guest into the existing narrative. So, we're going to go with "what is the deal with the Gnomes" as the arc we'll likely spend most of our time exploring during the live show. I have a few thoughts about how to link

all this together, so let's inventory what's what, shall we?

- + The PCs currently have the advantage of their non-murderous relationship with Azure Torrent and possession of the Feng Yan (though nobody present really knows what it's about)
- + They possess a thing that their handler, Kukrit, greatly desires to pursue his own agendas which is also an advantage for them
- + One of the PCs, Gideon, is free of his bonds, this is a bit of a mixed bag because, you know, Kukrit knows about the thing and also poor Gideon is a little bit cursed

by the damaged control ring he's wearing. It's a countdown clock of its own, leading to some very negative side effects I haven't decided on yet but oh boy they'll be nasty. I promise.

+ The Gnome Wars have recently come to an end, with the Forest Gnomes having been a combination of enslaved and ethnically cleansed from the Xulin Valley at the hands of the Rock Gnomes, for reasons I'm generally going to assume are the result of Elven influence

+ Speaking of which, we've met our first Elf, clad in the armor of their people, a colonizing force that, if I want to tie all this stuff together (and I do) is working with their unwitting vassal, the Rock Gnome King

So Here's the Deal

The Rock Gnome King, empowered and aided by the strange otherworldy entities called in this world Elves, has eliminated and enslaved his enemies, the Forest Gnomes, and will continue to, you know, just dick around and be an evil underworld bastard until the PCs show up to wreck face, which they'll do because Persnidgetron has promised his aid in freeing them or using the faculties of the Rock Gnome King to do so in

his stead.

What I'm Going to Need

Essentially, the eight hour live session is just one big opportunity to tell a part of our Court of Swords story. It needs to act like a self-contained episode in a way, because the format sets it aside from the campaign, but also needs to integrate into the campaign itself. I'm going to need to treat it both like a one-shot and not like one. I think we can do that with a solid lead-in and lead-out from the episode.

We've got a lot to cover in eight hours if the plan is "go defeat the Rock Gnome King" but as we know, the best games tend to be about finding out what happens, not deciding what will happen in advance, so while I should prep for the main intention of the PCs, I have also got to generally be aware of the world at large in case the players decide to go off and do something else. What's this going to take? An attention to prep around the specific - I'm going to need maps and encounters worked out that can take place in the caverns and halls of Rock Gnome Land deep below the valley. On top of that, though, some more generic stuff - knowing what kinds of monsters might dwell in the Undervalley and having some more



general mapping done around that. Thankfully, that's something that ought to be not-too-impossible with Roll20's help.

One thing I really want to consider is that this is a part of a larger world, that even though this is a side-quest into the Undervalley, it's still part of the Court of Swords story. I think the only real thing I need to do for this is stay in the mindset of the larger struggles of the world. Tying the Rock Gnome King's ambitions to the Elves will help here, as well as lesser hints at threats we've seen before - you know the Mara had some fun with all the genocidal Gnome stuff going on

Current Fronts / Countdowns / Threats in the World at Large

- + The Necromancer King in the riverlands
- + The Elven invasion of the Xulin Valley
- + Mounting political crisis between the Courts of Swords and Coins
- + The Mara's Interest in the PCs thanks to some recent

- blasphemy
- + Kukrit's anger at his pets
being sneaky and trying to
escape

The Gnome King's Lair

Until Snidge arrived on the scene, I honestly hadn't considered the place of Gnomes in Court of Swords. Honestly, since so much of D&D's mythology comes from a place that's ethnographically very different from Court of Swords, I often have to find parallels and just assume that "elf" or "gnome" or "kobold" are translations of whatever the people of the Courts call these creatures. Since Gnomes are a construct of 16th century Europe, I really didn't have anything to directly connect to them, so we're going to go a little broad.

I figure that Gnomes are a sort of nature-spirit. We haven't seen anything like this in Court of Swords yet, really - no dryads or maenads or the like. I figure they exist, like most Dwarves, outside the cycle of reincarnation and the Arcana that humans worship, and probably have some connection to the animistic order that gives Gideon his power. I wanted to keep the idea that they're secretive - like the Hobbits of the Shire, Gnomes are generally

unknown in the larger world - and remain mostly hidden, and like I often do, I let the player and their background fill in some of the details. This is a pretty regular trick I'll pull as a GM - instead of developing a whole people and culture myself, I'll allow the player who is an example of that culture to help develop it with or for me. You can see this happening in Court of Swords with Max and half-orcs, as well as in Swan Song, where Higgs' accent and behaviour became a synecdoche for the larger Asan culture.

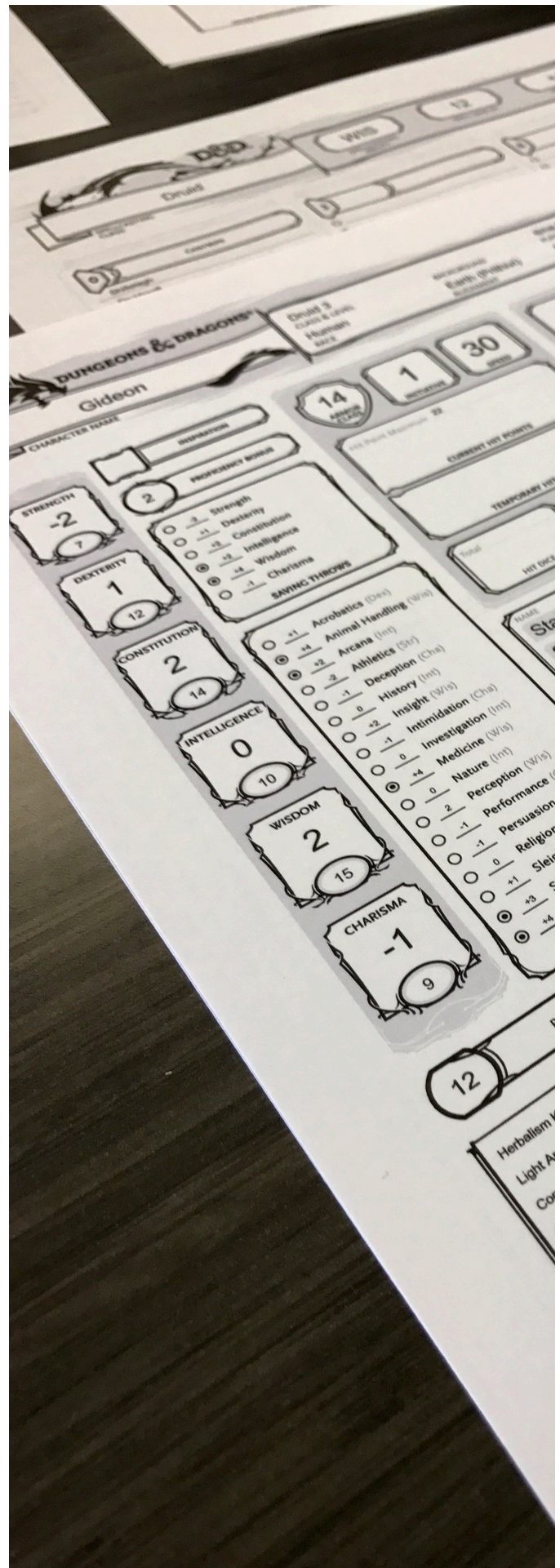
So we know that a) Gnomes exist and b) there are several types and c) they are or were at war. The Forest Gnomes have mostly lost that war and have been killed and captured en-masse, leaving very few survivors. One of which is our new friend Persnidgetron. So, as the GM, it's my job to detail and understand the opposition.

Now, taking on a King isn't a simple task - I suppose that if I wanted to be a hard-ass about it, I could say "there are thousands of Gnomish warriors at the behest of the Gnome King and sneaking into his lair and killing him just isn't going to happen. Only that's boring and doesn't jibe with what we've already established - I think the Xulin Valley is the only

place in the world where we can find Gnomes. We already know that the Valley is quite small, so that must mean that the Gnome population is low as well. I think there are very few Rock Gnomes and fewer still are the numbers who can fight and survived the War of the Gnomes. So what we're looking at as opposition is a lot less intense, and certainly within the capability of the PCs to sneak in and murder-hobo everything in an effort to reunite Snidge with what's left of his family.

Direct Prep With D&D, what I really need to know to DM properly is what is where. I can do flavour and player engagement and digging into backgrounds and NPC motivations and everything readily enough, but to absolutely be able to make sure the game goes well, I'm going to need two things: maps and monsters. I popped into Roll20 and put together a map that I'll use for the live game (you can find all the tiles I used in the Save vs. Cave series, by Gabriel Pickard, right here - <https://goo.gl/u6PUcY>). Once I had the actual sanctum of the Gnome King sorted out, I needed to populate it.

The trick with managing encounters in early level D&D is that, if you go purely by what's available in the Basic Rules, Monster Manual, and



Volo's Guide you're going to be pretty limited in what you've got available to you. When you're creating a biome-focused adventure like we are here, the amount of "cavern" creatures is a smaller subset and the amount of "cavern creatures likely to be in servitude or at least proximity to the Evil King of the Gnomes" is even smaller. This, however, is not an unsurmountable problem.

The simplest solution, and one I'm going to use for the Gnome King and his cohort is simply reskinning some creatures. Generally, you can take a stat block that says "goblin" and reimagine it as a mechanical goblin created to serve the Gnome King. This kind of thing is both a bane and boon to D&D in that a "gold dragon wyrmling" can be repurposed as a kind of jet-pack having golden-armored gigantic space elf warrior with a laser weapon instead of a breath attack but is still functionally identical. It means that the surface stuff - the "dragonness" of the dragon is fundamentally irrelevant. In this case, though, that works for me and I'm going to use it like crazy. So long as I'm not making changes to the mechanical elements of the monsters (or, at least, if I do, I adjust the CR accordingly using the guidelines in the DMG) I can use just about any CR-appropriate creature

and we can make-believe that it's a robot instead of a goblin.

A List of Creatures

Here are a list of all the monsters I used when planning the live show.

- + Gold Dragon Wyrmling (reskinned as extra-dimensional Elf warrior)
- + Goblin (reskinned as Mecha-Mogwai)
- + Svirfneblin
- + Rust Monster
- + Water Weird
- + Animated Armor
- + Flying Sword
- + Apprentice Wizard (w/ added Svirfneblin racial abilities)
- + Acolyte (w/ added Svirfneblin racial abilities)
- + Giant Spider
- + Giant Wolf Spider
- + Carrion Crawler
- + Bugbear (reskinned as lesser elemental guardian)
- + Wererat
- + Brass Dragon Wyrmling (reskinned as horrible magical science experiment)
- + Manticore

COURT OF SWORDS LIVE POST-SHOW NOTE

Prep vs. Improvisation - Thoughts on the Live Show

There's always a sense of relief and a bit of wonderment when a live show is over. Because it took so much work to get the show ready and so much energy from the entire cast to be able to get through the show in one piece once it's done there's this kind of punch-drunk feeling in the air. Eight hours of roleplaying is a significant undertaking, but the live shows are so satisfying to do - both as a thing in and of themselves but also as a break in the usual pacing of the week-to-week our campaigns usually take on. We had a talk as a group about what made the live show special, what we enjoyed about

it and how we all felt, but I thought it would be a good idea to sit down with y'all and expand a little on how things felt for me, as the DM.

One of the biggest anxiety factors in playing D&D, for me, is the idea that I might end up unprepared for some random thing that the players want to do. Some place they want to go that I haven't considered or some foe they intend to take on that I haven't got a stat block for. In a lot of the games that I love (Apocalypse World, Burning Wheel, Stars Without Number) this kind of thing isn't as nerve-inducing because either the stat blocks necessary in the game are much simpler or the tactical elements of location aren't



as relevant. Generally, I prefer games whose prep is of a conceptual nature primarily and a detailed tactical nature thereafter. That said, D&D is a great challenge, because it requires that I try to imagine ahead what might be interesting to my players, which gives me some incentive to better understand what drives them, which in turn I think improves our relationship at the table and makes the game itself better. There's also an element of system mastery involved - a good GM makes improvisation easier by understanding the space around the players, mechanically. Knowing the kinds of monsters that fill the various CR niches, for example. Understanding what kinds of challenges are appropriate for the situation and level of the characters, etc. Over the course of the campaign, I've been able to build that knowledge of 5e D&D and combine it with my overall concepts for the campaign and the interests of my players and I'm able to (usually on breaks, sometimes frantically) sling together random encounters as needed.

In the live game, this kind of prep-anxiety can be a lot more prevalent, because the live show is both a contained event and part of an ongoing show. I tried to let go of the idea that the eight hour session needed a contained beginning,

middle and end and give myself over to the idea that it would progress naturally. To see it more like a double episode and not attempt to time it specifically. Keep the pacing organic. We started with a bang, which I always like to do with any given session and I think we had a nice mix overall of slower lore-delivery content and high-tension murderhoboing. Even so, with all the dungeon prep I did, we spent much of the first half of the session in a place I didn't expect at all.

When JP decided to consult the spirits of the valley, I was at a bit of a loss. I know D&D, and I know what it needs to successfully engage the mechanisms that power it - it needs challenges to overcome (mostly combat, some potential for combat avoidance) and to do that properly, I need monsters with stats and locations that make interacting with

those monsters more interesting than just "you're on a featureless plain, there are goblins here". So, what I did when the game took a bit of a left turn is I leaned into what I already knew about the world. I returned to some of my more general prep, tried to incorporate what we already knew about the campaign setting, and build towards what I did have prepped, so that the new thing would lead into a place I was more prepared to Dungeon Master around in. Here's what I had;

- + A player needed something, in this case, answers about the general goings-on in the world. When a player is in this position, they want to engage the world to learn more about it so that they can make a decision about the direction of their character. I like to call this process "interrogating the fiction" and you can see it in player behaviour in every RPG. It's the





player asking “what’s really going on here”.

+ I knew the general history of the Valley itself, and how that tied into several of the ongoing struggles there - an ancient race of colossal creatures once did battle here and the results empowered the Valley with an ancient magic that, over the centuries, have made it desirable to many. Currently, the Elves and the Mara and the Courts of Coins and Swords.

+ I had a seed of something interesting I’d planted earlier with no real idea what to do with it - I’ll do this in campaigns, drop hints

about little things that have no direct relevance on the situation at hand but that might grow into something larger later, when I need it to. Things I can call on to create verisimilitude via reincorporation. A sense of the world being real and connected. In this case, the kenku shrine that the PCs found several episodes back.

+ The sudden addition, via a player, of something new to the narrative. When a player says something like “I want to go visit the spirits of the Valley” it’s a golden gift on a velvet pillow - this is the best stuff as a GM because it’s a huge indicator that the player

wants to get invested in the world or the setting. I love when players make stuff up and I wanted to embrace and do justice to that idea. I was more than happy to say “well, I hadn’t considered that but of course the Valley has spirit guardians you can go talk to”

So, weaving all that together gave us the kenku cave, the old bird, the vision and the steel shard. All of that came from bits and pieces of prep, both public and private, from prior work I’d done for the campaign. The only thing I needed was a luckily-timed break to put together a quick map

and the rest was just improv using the tools I had at hand. It was nice to get a chance to do that, honestly. D&D affords less opportunity to wing it than most of the games I’ve played lately, so the change was nice and I think the players appreciated the effort. I hope the audience did as well! I think it gives us some nice starting places for future adventure, as well. The mysterious race of Colossi and their connection to the Valley could provide some interesting stuff, especially at higher levels.

COURT OF SWORDS - CHARACTER PORTRAITS



BERG



GIDEON



RAMIUS



PERSNIDGETRON TORBISHER



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SWAN SONG

“Then perhaps you need to find yourself a new god, Pi.”

- Mr Sicarian

Swan Song: Episode 3 Prep (the Highbeam Pirate still on board is Raul Valdés, a former Onintzan marine) Pedro

- the crew destroyed (with the "help" of some highbeam pirates) asteroid mining dome 47-B49 (a leased property of the Mildenstein Alliance subsidiary DrillX) no ramifications on this for some time
- they'll need time for Higs to recover (4 days to 1hp + (level in hp/day) or (2x level + Tech/Medical if only resting) as well, they may want to repair the Swan Song (at a cost of 1000 credits / hp at 10hp/day)
- if they visit Onintza, they're approached by an old friend of ^{Viktor's, a friend from University (Psitech)} Mr. Secarian's, a former ~~merc~~ turned diplomat who asks them to shuttle a package for her (her name is Mary Al-Sadiq) to the University on Anaximander (the package is encrypted hard drives containing endangered cultural works). She offers 5,000 credits but can be talked up to 7,750 max.
- if they visit Majid for their repairs, an old friend of Piani's, one Helen Henson, an independent miner, asks for help recovering her claim from some Madari Syndicate goons who have jumped it and taken her crew - the syndicate is paying them in Blue Fever... she tells Piani she can't afford to pay, but will "owe them" if they're willing to help.
- the Highbeam Fleet isn't aware of what happened, so the Pizza Party is ripe for pillage. The ship itself is stripped bare by design, with only limited systems. To access the core, the PCs will need to either force the blast doors or access the AI that controls the ship and convince it to give them access. Without shielded suits, anyone removing the core is exposed to radiation.
- Once the PCs have access to the core, they can tell Ximenez to come get it. They'll also need to hire a crew to salvage it (the ship). As that is happening, they're contacted by a local Sunbeam rep who offers 50,000 for the core, right now. Tex Monday works for Debediah Salt, a powerful man at Sunbeam.
- If the PCs give the core to Sunbeam, Ximenez black-lists them and hires privateers to wreck the Swan Song. If they give it to Ximenez, Sunbeam (aka Salt) is "sure disappointed" but makes no effort to retaliate.
- If they don't want to stick around, they can re-sell the salvage rights for a percentage, minus labour

SWN FACTION ACTIONS (page 115)

[The date is January 22nd, 3200. Consider this official.]

100 creds

Attack:

doctor 100/day

• vac suit: AC 7, radios, -2 penalty. 6hrs oxy. 2 type A cell / (100 creds)

- Only vs known assets on the same world
- attacker chooses an asset to attack, defender chooses asset to defend
- 1d10 + Attack attributes vs. 1d10 + defend attribute
- If Attacker > Defender, asset takes damage (or Base of Influence if defender prefers) If Defender > Attacker, counterattack. If it is a tie, both occur.

Expand Influence:

12 hours

- buy Base of Influence
- roll 1d10 + Cunning vs. Each other Faction
- enemies that beat this get free attacks, but assets defend as usual
- base is "asleep" 1 turn

Buy Asset: purchase one asset of rating or lower, Asset is "asleep" this turn.

Refit Asset: trade one for another, paying the difference

Change Homeworld: move homeworld to new Base of Influence takes 1 turn + 1 / hex distant

Repair: 1 cred = hp in ruling attribute, can be done more than once 1/2/3 creds.

Swan Song GM

Notes

Commentary

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Swan Song Episode 3 Prep

What strikes me here is how many little threads I spun out just in case. At this point in the campaign, I barely know these folks either as characters or as players (or, frankly, as people) and it's interesting seeing how I try to prepare for any given thing they might do. Even more telling, watching the show, is that they more-or-less do the thing I didn't expect, and I ended up having to wing it anyway. Note how many proper nouns get introduced in this note section and never visited or attended to again. I wonder what the Mildenshern Alliance is up to these days? How's DrillX doing?

There are a few mission seeds here, but I don't think the PCs really ended up pursuing any of them with any aplomb. Which is nice - I think the bane of this style of campaign (missions assigned and dealt with one at a time) is when that's all the campaign is about. Most of the time as a GM what you want to do is give the PCs things to do in a mission-oriented space but let the real narrative emerge from what happens between and around those missions. That tends to happen organically, but in the early sessions you do really have to be prepared for the players not to know what to do. This can be a plague in a sandbox-style campaign as well - especially if the system doesn't motivate the players to reward themselves or they just don't have as much experience with it.

"They can tell Ximinez to come get it"

Hah. Yeah, this whole section about who to turn the AI core over to was a nice prep exercise but ultimately fruitless. Unbraking the Pizza Party was the first major curveball this campaign threw my way. Goes to show that saying "sure, why not" to your players' crazy plans can pay off in spades if you let it.

SWN Faction Actions

One thing that endeared me to Stars Without Number (and, subsequently, endeared the hardest-core fans to Swan Song) was the occasional GM turns that powered the ongoing universe. This is, in my opinion, the killer element of Kevin Crawford's games, and the thing that really made them sing for me as a GM.

Without the GM turn, SWN is just a retro-clone of Basic D&D with space stuff and a Traveller-style mechanical resolution system. It's just not that exciting on its own. Adding in the GM turn, and the Faction system turns this game from a pretty cool set of random tables about space into a really fantastic world-generator. More importantly than that, it gave Swan Song a sense of background magic. A sense that the world had its own cares and concerns and that even if the PCs were doing big ridiculous things like getting caught up in the destruction of entire planets, the universe at large just kept rolling on.

These notes predate the first Swan Song GM turn, which I broadcast on my stream and recorded on YouTube. You can actually catch that playlist (and me in all my awkward brand-new-streamer glory) here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuECPhaEMNA>

I'm constantly on the lookout for games with applications like this - things that codify the GM experience in a larger way. I miss the Faction Turn and I hope more game designers will include stuff like this in their games in the future. As a GM, it's a very exciting kind of mechanism.

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